

Understanding the teacher upgrade programme in Samoa: Contextual challenges for in-service teachers, school principals and Ministry personnel

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges involved in Samoa's teacher upgrade programme. The teacher upgrade initiative came about because of the Samoan Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture's aim for all in-service primary and secondary teachers to hold a Bachelor of Education degree. However, challenges including time scheduling, teachers' wider responsibilities, unsupportive school principals, and communication barriers with the National University of Samoa appear to have hindered the programme's implementation. This study employed a qualitative research approach which incorporated *talanoa* (rich conversation) as appropriate to the Samoan context. The findings from the *talanoa* sessions with teachers, principals and Ministry officials, highlight the social, cultural, educational and economic challenges that the teachers encountered on their qualification upgrade journeys. We argue that the challenges between the upgrading teachers, the schools, the National University of Samoa's Faculty of Education and the Ministry could be being resolved through the Samoan notion of *va* (relational space) in which stakeholders generate mutual solutions to the challenges they encounter. This article concludes with recommendations for each of the partners involved in the upgrade programme in order to move forward.

Introduction

In the past five years, the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture (MESC) in Samoa has taken a major step to improve teachers' qualifications, skills and knowledge. The *Corporate Plan July 2015 to June 2018* (MESC, 2015) proposed that teachers' qualifications be upgraded in order to enhance the quality of teachers and teaching in Samoa. The target was to have all primary and secondary school teachers in Samoa upgrade their qualifications from a diploma to a bachelors degree. This move is in line with other countries in the region, as well as internationally, as there is increased demand for better qualified teachers to meet the needs of school communities and the expectations of society (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). In following this trend, the Ministry mandated that all teachers in Samoa participate in the teacher upgrade programme (MESC, 2016b). At the request of the Ministry, the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa was invited to implement the teacher upgrade initiative. The small-scale qualitative study reported in this article investigated the challenges encountered by all the upgrade partners, namely, the upgrading teachers, school principals, the National University of Samoa and the Ministry, as this programme was implemented.

Context

Samoa is no exception among countries in attempting to raise the standard of education by focusing on improving the qualifications of its teachers (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). Upgrading teachers' qualifications from diploma to bachelor level is seen as a significant way to improve both the educational levels of students and the overall quality of the education system. To this end, the Ministry and the Public Service Commission agreed to upgrading teachers' certificate and diploma-level qualifications to a Bachelor of Education or Postgraduate Diploma of Education through the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa.

Teacher upgrade discussions between the Ministry and the Faculty of Education began in 2013. At that time, the Ministry noted that the majority of teachers only held teaching certificates with very few teachers holding degrees. In 2016, those concerns were confirmed as Ministry reported that, across government, mission and private schools, around 1300 Samoan teachers held certificates whereas only 129 held degrees (MESC, 2016a). It was at this time that the teacher upgrade programme was introduced with an ambitious five-year plan that, by 2020, all practising teachers would hold a Bachelor of Education degree. To ensure the initiative was successful, the Ministry proposed implementing the teacher upgrade programme for cohorts of teachers, whereby a small number of in-service teachers would undertake the upgrade programme each year.

The idea of a teacher upgrade programme was met with approval from both primary and secondary teachers in Samoa. They recognised that it would help to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, and many also welcomed the chance to upgrade their qualifications to a degree level, and the salary increase that would come with this. However, along the way, the programme encountered a range of obstacles. First, although teachers were eager to participate, the teacher shortage meant that only a small number were able to be released from their teaching duties at any one time. Second, those teachers who were able to undertake the training encountered a number of challenges, such as unfamiliarity with new technologies. Adeosun (2011) notes that the teaching profession is facing "challenges such as rapid technological advancements, changing patterns of work, explosion in information access and use [which] all make the inculcation of 21st century skills imperative" (p. 3). Most teachers from developing nations like Samoa have very little exposure to, or understanding of, these technological advancements. In fact, different conceptions of technology, work and education, such as those experienced by people in developing nations like Samoa, also create conflicts between well-educated Samoans, ethnic minority groups, and Samoans with limited resources and education. Collins (1978, cited in Sadvnik, 2004, p. 8) argued that "education is increasingly used by dominant groups to secure more advantageous places in the occupational and social structure for themselves and their children." There is a lack of research into the impact that the upgrading of teacher qualifications has on the teaching profession and teachers' status in wider society, especially in the Pacific region, an area made up primarily of developing countries. This study begins to fill this gap by contributing to understanding the complexities faced when implementing a programme in these settings.

Literature review

The research literature on teacher upgrade programmes raises a range of issues that are pertinent to the situation in Samoa. The first of these concerns the literacy levels of teachers. There have been questions raised in recent years about the literacy skills of teachers in Samoa, and, through this, questions about the quality of education itself. Many teachers in Samoa speak English as a second language, but are required to deliver the curriculum in English. Unsurprisingly, some teachers struggle with the literacy expectations of English. Bernstein (1990, cited in Sadovnik, 2004) explains that, “speech patterns reflect students’ social class background and notes how students from working class backgrounds are at a disadvantage in educational settings because schools are essentially middle class organisations” (p. 8). Limited literacy levels in the language of instruction, therefore, cause difficulties for both the upgrading teachers and the education system. Also, the current education system at primary, secondary and tertiary levels relies heavily on Eurocentric rather than Samoan values, and such a belief system benefits middle-class Samoans who have backgrounds with higher levels of literacy and wider educational experiences. The difficulties with English are at the heart of the problem for many upgrading teachers. Without a good command of English, the upgrading teachers are not able to reach their potential and they struggle to achieve the expected qualifications. Their underachievement in education is also exacerbated because the English language carries with it the values and ideas of the middle class (Bernstein, 1990, cited in Sadovnik, 2004). One example of how students’ underachievement in the education system was viewed as a concern appeared in a letter to the editor in the *Samoa Observer* newspaper in 2017. In this letter, a former teacher and principal, expressed a serious concern about teachers’ literacy and numeracy skills. Maiava (2017) also claimed that, “inadequacy in teachers’ understanding of English is and will remain the biggest stumbling-block to achieving quality education” (p. 10). Issues with teachers’ literacy comprise, however, an area which, with support, the teacher upgrade programme should be able to address. *The Pacific Benchmarking for Educational Results* analysis of Samoa’s current education development (Luamanu, 2017a) has recommended to the Ministry that “more support is needed to increase teacher knowledge, time and motivation” (p. 1) if teachers are to receive quality education. Luamanu (2017a) also argues that more specialised training for teachers will enhance their self-reliance in teaching the curriculum bilingually in Samoan and English.

Another key concern in the literature, as highlighted earlier, is teachers’ unfamiliarity with technological tools and changes. Teacher upgrade programmes, such as Samoa’s, can provide new knowledge and skills for in-service teachers to enable them to face the technological changes that have altered the modern classroom. The opportunity to upskill teacher’s technological competence was also highlighted by research in Nigeria in which Arikawei (2015) noted that an important factor of the teacher upgrade programme in that country was to support teachers to acquire an understanding of the “use of instructional technology such as computers, and [the] internet” (p. 4). To achieve this, Arikawei (2015) recommended that upgrading the teaching profession would involve “a mechanism of redesigning teacher preparation” (p. 4) in order to

achieve these new skills and knowledge. There is a similar expectation that most schools in developing nations, including Samoa, will be introduced to these technologies and so teachers will need appropriate training to gain personal and professional competence.

The literature also raises the issue of the academic preparation of teachers for advanced study. Malawi, a former colonised nation like Samoa, had similar challenges with their teacher upgrade programme. Many upgrading teachers showed frustrations of “lacking in confidence, [where] feelings of inadequacy [were] compounded by the introduction of the new curriculum at both junior and senior levels with next to no training” (Tudor-Craig, 2002, p. 10). Similar concerns were raised by Junaid and Maka (2014) pertaining to the Sub-Saharan Africa teacher upgrade. They observed that the “academic and pedagogical skills required to prepare teachers for effective teaching are rarely consolidated by the end of training” (p. 36). Most teachers used the programme to upgrade to a bachelors degree but without understanding the vital academic skills and knowledge that would be required of them. These academic requirements include the acquisition of new knowledge, teaching, learning, speaking and reading skills, critical thinking, and the ability to craft an academic argument. The Samoan Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (MESC, 2006) also saw the teacher upgrade programme as an opportunity and a second chance for in-service teachers to upgrade “skills and pursue academic qualifications” (p. 26) for the betterment of teaching and learning for both teachers and students in order to achieve quality education in Samoa. The present study aims to explore whether teachers in Samoa faced the same challenges with the academic requirements as teachers in the other developing nations discussed in this review.

Objectives of the teacher upgrade in Samoa

The teacher upgrade programme was an initiative that sought professional and personal development for teachers. It envisaged teachers undergoing professional development that would focus on the dynamics of subject knowledge and the pedagogical practices linked to knowledge transmission. The idea was to improve teachers’ knowledge and skills across all areas of the education system. Samoa is bombarded by literacy and numeracy concerns which have led to the call for quality teachers to address the problem by participating in professional development. This was the main claim highlighted in the *Pacific Benchmarking for Education* results (Luamanu, 2017b). The report recommended that “teachers are required to participate in professional development” because “teachers have limited capacity and skills to effectively teach literacy and numeracy” (Luamanu, 2017b, p. 1) in the Samoan classroom. Therefore, having teachers upgrade their qualifications at the National University Samoa would contribute to improving teaching knowledge and skills across all subject areas. When teachers are trained to meet the current learning demands of students in Samoa, it would open the frontiers to improving student learning outcomes and provide better access to understanding and utilising current technology. Moreover, it would also help teachers and their students to become better teachers and learners, respectively. The personal and professional benefits accrued through the programme could also lead to leadership opportunities, positions of responsibility, and an increase in salary and marketability.

Theoretical framework

This study combines Samoan and Western concepts in order to provide a relevant and coherent theoretical and subsequent methodological framework. As a Polynesian concept linked to relational space, *va* is the overarching theoretical concept that is used to explore the challenges and complexities associated with the teacher upgrade programme in this study. For Samoan people, *va* is where one learns to understand her or his role and responsibilities in relation to others. Another form of *va* can be understood through *va tapuia* (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006). It is through the sacred space of *va tapuia* that we, as the researchers, learn to mediate our position and conflicts in relation to the participants in the study. This means that we are obligated, and have the responsibility, to bridge and build relationships through the *va tapuia* because “that is far more important than any research results can ever be” (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006, p. 203).

The Western concepts are drawn from conflict theory (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Wilson, 2011). This article describes the challenges encountered by in-service teachers, school principals and the Ministry’s Assistant Chief Executive Officers during the early implementation of the teacher upgrade programme in Samoa. The challenges are associated with the social, cultural, educational and economic conflicts that hinder individuals’ progress in society. Wilson (2011) described such conflicts as an “arena or social battlefield where different individuals and groups contest one another in order to obtain scarce and valued resources, most of which have economic implications” (p. 1). Conflict theorists view schooling as a tool utilised by the elite to socially, culturally and educationally reproduce individual class systems. Those from different class systems struggle to survive. As Wilson (2011) explained, “education institutions attempt to makeover the knowledge, dispositions and values of lower class” (p. 1) or minority groups where English is their second language. As a result, many students fail or gain only marginal passes due to their limited knowledge of English. Within the context of this study, most of the upgrade teachers are from non-English-speaking families yet the language of instruction in the country’s education institutions is English. The English language is a code that only children of dominant elite class families are more familiar with because they speak it at home and in school (Echevarria et al., 2008). These social and cultural differences create conflicts for the teachers as they engage in the upgrade programme.

We argue that any resolution of conflicts can be mediated through *va* and *va tapuia* because it is within such spaces that people learn to negotiate challenges. While conflict theory helps to understand the socio-political order between groups of people competing for resources, *va* and *va tapuia* provide a more holistic and inclusive context for relationship mediation and re-building (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study as the underlying concepts resonate with the theoretical concepts and indigenous research methodologies that include *va/va tapuia*, *talanoa* and *nofo*. In order to understand the challenges related to implementing the teacher upgrade programme, the perceptions of the in-service

teachers, school principals, and Ministry officers were explored. As outlined above, engagement with *va/va tapuia* in research practice requires one to know oneself first in one's relationship with others as in the *va tapuia* (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006). This is paramount to determining an appropriate and ethical practice that does not cause conflict or undermine others within the research project (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006).

Talanoa and *nofo* have also guided the operation and organisation of the study design. Tuia (2013), writing from a Samoan perspective, described "*talanoa* as to do with telling stories (*tala*) that are spun, strung and bound (*noa*) by people's honesty, confidence, and shared political, historical, and socio-cultural interests" (p. 104). In Samoa, people usually conduct *talanoa* through face-to-face conversations between two or more people, in close proximity to one another as informal interchanges. In fact, the respectful way of conducting *talanoa* in the Samoan cultural context is through both *talanoa* and *nofo*. As described by Tuia (2013), *nofo* is sitting or staying. It is important in Samoa for any untitled female and male adults, teenagers or children to *nofo* and *talanoa* if there are *matais* or people of higher status in the setting. The dual relationship between *talanoa* and *nofo* requires time for the researcher to solicit appropriate responses from participants. Because the social and cultural context of the research is Samoan, it was deemed appropriate for the *talanoa* and *nofo* to be part of the qualitative research methodology. The research findings from the *talanoa* and *nofo* will be used to inform the responses to the research question: "What were the challenges faced during the implementation of the teacher upgrade programme and how could these be overcome?"

All participants willingly agreed to participate as per the ethical guidelines of the National University of Samoa. The responses in the *talanoa* were recorded in written form so that they could be later analysed. Sarantakos' (1998) cyclical analysis process and Neuman's (1994, cited in Sarantakos, 1998) typology were used to analyse the data. These methods require the researcher to look for patterns in the data, such as recurring behaviours or events. When such patterns are identified, "the researcher will then interpret them, moving from description of empirical data to interpretation" (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 314). The cyclical process of analysis and accompanying typology also links qualitative research to *talanoa* and *nofo* as the *talanoa* process is also one of unfolding meaning. The *talanoa* and *nofo* revealed participants' educational views and opinions in relation to teacher upgrade. Neuman's typology method of analytic comparison was used to complement, classify and confirm the different views from participants. In addition, analytic comparison assisted the discovery of similarities in meanings and views on the teacher upgrade across the different categories of participants. After going through the cyclical process, the raw data were sorted into emerging themes which will be the basis for outlining the findings and the discussion of the research that follows.

Discussion of findings

The *talanoa* and *nofo* between the researchers and upgrading teachers, principals and the Ministry officers uncovered interesting responses from the three groups and highlighted their views on the challenges of implementing the teacher upgrade programme. The findings will be set out group by group beginning with the upgrading teachers.

Focus group talanoa with the upgrading teachers

Three themes emerged from the upgrading teacher participant data. First, that undertaking their study in English was a barrier to their success; second, that there was mixed support from the Ministry and schools; and third, that they faced challenges with technology and time management.

Theme 1: The English language barrier

The upgrading teachers' responses revealed that English language competence was a major problem in their studies. Almost all participants had difficulties understanding the instructions and reading materials. Upgrading teachers identified terminology in the readings that was often difficult to understand. For instance, participant TU106 stated that "one of the challenges for me is the education course reader because the vocabulary is difficult and the essays are between 1,000-1,500 words." TU100 faced similar challenges: "English is the language of instruction and there is no way but to try and understand what is already there." These quotes highlight several of the English language-related issues the upgrading teachers faced as they struggled to read and make sense of the materials, contribute in class or complete written assignments. In order for the upgrading teachers to successfully complete their programme they need further support to improve their command of English.

Theme 2: Receiving support from the Ministry and schools

Upgrading teacher participants also struggled with the amount and quality of support from the Ministry and their schools. Upgrading teachers had mixed perceptions of the support available from these institutions. TU100 said that "we always listen to the principal and they can't really do much unless they receive permission from Ministry of Education for us to be released for our National University of Samoa classes." TU100's response suggests that there was very limited communication between the Ministry and the school principals which contributed to the teachers' inability to successfully complete the upgrade programme. However, TU106 added that, "good communication between the teacher and principal is not enough, and they need more support from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, parents and teachers." This response indicates that many upgrade teachers had problems with their studies because they also believed they were not receiving proper assistance from either the Ministry, their schools or parents.

Theme 3: Technology and time management

The final theme to emerge from the *talanoa* with the upgrading teachers was how their limited technological capability and access to technological tools impacted on their ability to complete their studies and manage their time well. For instance, TU106 stated that "internet services is always down and we have problems accessing emails so we always use our mobile phones to contact our lecturers." Similarly, TU107 identified that "poor internet services have a negative impact on my studies which contributes to difficulties in time management, and slow work progress." In addition, even when

access to computer and internet services is available, not all of the teachers had the necessary skills to use these tools effectively in their studies. According to participant TU100, “the use of technology is so hard for me; although I took a computer course I still have very limited understanding”. Interestingly, TU103 found that the course had increased their computer skills and so improved their confidence in using such technology in the classroom: “I have gained a lot by using modern technology and I also apply it in the classroom in using the computer”. As these quotes indicate, the teacher upgrade participants noted that access to reliable internet services affected their time management, and was a major challenge in their efforts to complete their studies. In fact, not only did these problems delay their ability to complete their studies on time, but they also affected their chances of doing well in their assignments. The difficulties they faced in being able to manage their time also relates to one of the key concerns that principals had of the upgrading teachers. The principals expressed their frustrations with what they perceived as the upgrading teachers’ inability to balance their studies with their school roles.

Talanoa with the school principals

While school principals also perceived there to be many challenges associated with the teacher upgrade programme, they viewed these challenges differently to the teachers. The challenges identified by the principals have been categorised under two themes: first, frustration with the support provided for teachers by the Ministry and the National University of Samoa; and second, the perceived difficulties teachers had balancing studies with their teaching responsibilities.

Theme 1: Support provided for teachers

The different groups involved in the upgrade programme expressed frustration with each other in relation to support for the teachers’ involvement. Participant 011, for example, shared a frustration with the Ministry and the University: “I want to support them in what they do but I also want their support as well like notifying me when they have exams”. Principal participant 016 also expressed his frustration with the Ministry and the University:

Those in the upgrade programme are in a dilemma as the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture has stipulated all teachers in the programme should not be released during school hours but can attend the Faculty of Education of the National University of Samoa classes after hours.

However, this conflict in scheduling places both the University and the upgrading teachers in a very difficult position. This lack of communication highlights that the parties involved need better communication and co-ordination in order to provide the support needed for the upgrading teachers to be successful in their studies.

Theme 2: The difficulties associated with balancing studies with teaching responsibilities

Another important theme that emerged from the *talanoa* with school principals was the challenges teachers faced in balancing their responsibilities as teachers with their study requirements. The principals generally thought that teachers should spend less time on their studies. Principal participant 015 stated that he “talked to the teachers about the importance of time management and balancing their teaching and studies to benefit everyone”. Similarly, principal participant 014 reported that “I invited them into my office and advised them to leave whatever assignments they are doing for another time and concentrate on teaching”. Additionally, some principals thought teachers were taking advantage of them by pretending to be studying in order to get time off from school. Principal participant 010 said, “I told them that it is unfair to lie to me, your students is your first priority and not to use upgrade classes as an excuse and leave them unattended”. Balancing time between studies and teaching was clearly a challenge for the upgrading teachers, and also an area of conflict between the teachers and their principals.

While the upgrade programme caused many challenges for teachers and principals, the Ministry of Education Assistant Chief Executive Officers’ *talanoa* and *nofo* sessions also revealed the challenges they perceived with the upgrade programme.

Talanoa with the Ministry’s Assistant Chief Executive Officers

The Ministry’s main priority was to ensure that all teachers with certificates and diplomas upgraded to a Bachelor of Education through the National University of Samoa. However, the Ministry officers indicated that this goal was not easy to achieve due to numerous challenges, which were categorised into the following themes: first, the challenges in implementing the programme; second, a lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa; and third, limited technology infrastructure.

Theme 1: Challenges in implementing the programme

Ministry participants’ responses revealed the difficulties the Ministry was going through in its first attempt to implement the teacher upgrade. According to Ministry participant 020, “the implementation challenge for the first time was the lack of funding”. Furthermore, “we implemented the policy two years ago in 2016 but when I started there was no policy to guide teacher upgrade and that’s one of the tasks that I had to complete.” However, it did not stop the Ministry from activating the teacher upgrade programme. In fact, the Ministry consulted with the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa asking them to align their academic policies with the aims of the programme in order for it to start. To support the Ministry’s initiative, the Faculty of Education was willing to provide courses and lecturers to accommodate the teacher upgrade on the main islands of Upolu and Savai’i. However, after the programme was under way, more challenges were noted by the Ministry and the Faculty of Education. As described by Ministry participant 023, “the implication is that teachers would leave the school during teaching time for the National University of Samoa classes and that

left a huge gap for the principals without the upgrade teachers.” The problem mentioned by participant 023 was similar to the concern raised by school principals of the teachers needing to attend to their own classes during school time. This relates to the next theme: the lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa.

Theme 2: Lack of communication between the Ministry and the National University of Samoa

The response from the Assistant Chief Executive Officer participants reveals the Ministry’s point of view pertaining to teachers’ claims that there was poor communication from the National University of Samoa (NUS). According to Ministry participant 020, “teachers say that they never received any communication”, but “we have gone to the student admin, we’ve gone to the Dean, we’ve done public notices, trying to make sure that the teachers are aware of this process.” Ministry participant 020 further explained that “in terms of hours and in terms of delivery, the Ministry has no control of scheduled NUS class times”. The Ministry anticipated that all the upgraders’ courses would be made available in the evening after school, yet this was not the case. Ministry participant 022 also echoed the earlier sentiment that “communication is another challenge especially when there are competing priorities running parallel.” Evidently, there needs to be clearer communication between teachers, school principals, the Ministry and the University to ensure everyone has the same expectations and knowledge around classes and assignments, as well as when these are to take place.

Theme 3: Technology infrastructure

The final problem identified in the *talanoa* with the Assistant Chief Executive Officers was the lack of appropriate technological infrastructure resulting in poor communication. According to participant 021, “the ongoing challenge with the Ministry is the network and the break-down of the network; it’s a never ending struggle with the Ministry”. It has led to many complaints by teacher upgraders when they are unable to contact the Ministry or the National University of Samoa. In addition, Ministry participant 020 explained the “infrastructure is one of the challenges because the network sometimes doesn’t work properly in remote areas, like Savai’i.” Likewise, Ministry participant 022 blamed the Ministry’s lack of funds as resulting in poor internet services in remote areas. According to Ministry participant 022, “the Ministry of Education’s financial problems are the cause of poor network and we are not able to achieve what we set out to do in terms of the upgrade”. As a result, upgrading teachers often ended up with numerous problems that interfered with their studies leading to discouragement and demotivation.

Discussion

There is a world-wide expectation that teachers, especially in developing countries, should upgrade their qualifications to keep up with the changes in global technology and the modern school curriculum. The former Ministry of Education Chief Executive Officer Matafeo stated that:

Research has shown that the quality of education depends on the quality of our teachers. Times have changed and things have changed. Also the approach to teaching, the approach to learning in terms of the curriculum has changed and therefore we really need to be serious about this and set up this body and make sure that the teachers are well qualified to teach our children. (CEO, MESC, 2015, p. 1)

Quality teaching is important if Samoa is going to have an education system that meets the needs of its students, and prepares them for a globalised, technologically advanced world. This is why the teacher upgrade programme is of such great importance. Through this programme, the Ministry wanted to ensure that every child in Samoa would be taught by a highly qualified teacher who has the appropriate knowledge and skills to deliver the highest quality education (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2006). Education is perceived to be particularly important in developing countries like Samoa. Indeed, teacher upgrading is seen by UNESCO as the only way forward for former colonised nations. This is reflected in the Samoan educational documents that highlight the ongoing directive from UNESCO (MESC, 2006, 2015, 2016a) in their attempt to guarantee quality education for every child.

A good education system in a developing society is one that recognises, embraces and incorporates all cultures, values, and ethnic groups by providing educational opportunities for all to reach their educational goals. Moreover, a good education system needs to recognise the values of society and, in the Samoan context, the concepts of *va* and *va tapuia* are particularly helpful in allowing the various stakeholders involved in education to negotiate through potential conflicts. According to Amituanai-Tolosa (2006), *va tapuia* “creates, instigates, mediates, negotiates all aspects of relationships and negates societal or conflictual differences and disputes before they arise” (p. 201). If a successful education system is one that keeps abreast of current information and knowledge, pedagogical skills and know-how then teachers need access to relevant and practical experiences to pursue further studies and expand their repertoire of knowledge and skills in the classroom. With the world undergoing tremendous change socially, educationally, politically, economically and culturally, technological advancement has become a vital contribution to the 21st century classroom. Research, best practices and the discovery of innovative teaching resources in the education field can provide examples of pedagogical understandings and techniques that 21st century teachers need (Crompton, 2013; Goldin & Katz, 2018; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012).

The *talanoa* with upgrading teachers, school principals and Ministry officials highlighted the many challenges associated with the current upgrade programme that are hindering the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to improve teaching and learning in Samoan schools. The teachers upgrading their qualifications are facing significant personal challenges, including access to the necessary technological infrastructure and competence in the language of instruction. Such challenges are described by Wilson (2011) as the education system’s “hidden agenda” used by schools and tertiary institutions “to reproduce those same inequities thereby maintaining the position of power for the dominant social group” (p. 1). The result of such an agenda is

the continuation of educational conflict between upgrading teachers from backgrounds where English is their second language and the dominant education system in tertiary institutions where English is the language of success.

To assist upgrading teachers' performance and achievement in tertiary institutions, lecturers need to provide high-quality educational learning opportunities. As the teacher participants indicated, they encounter on-going challenges with the course materials because of the level of English competence required. It is vital for the Ministry and the National University of Samoa to provide the support needed by upgrading teachers to ensure that they are able to participate in the programme fully and acquire updated knowledge and skills. Success in the upgrade programme also requires the Ministry and the National University of Samoa to establish strong systems of communication with both schools and teachers so that the current opportunities for miscommunication are eliminated. This will also ensure that all parties understand what is expected, where and when.

Technological advancements in the field have also given rise to the knowledge explosion which has contributed to interactive and practical innovations in tertiary education. These changes bring new theories and methodologies that most upgrading teachers, the Ministry and the school principals view as complications. In fact, such changes create "increasing disconnection between the social class and cultural values of educators and those of their students" (Wilson, 2011, p. 2). This disconnect is due to the differences in knowledge, resources, culture, socialisation and society which are not always recognised or acknowledged. Conflict theorists argue that "portraying society in this manner ignores the obvious conflict of values and interests that exists throughout society" (Wilson, 2011, p. 2). These challenges need to be further addressed, and we argue that *va tapuia* could provide the means through which to acknowledge, discuss and negotiate a way through these changes and their effects.

Despite the many challenges faced by the different stakeholders, the upgrading teachers' aspirations, the Ministry's determination and National University of Samoa's support have ensured that the teacher upgrade has proved successful. Upgrading to higher qualifications has become a milestone for many teachers, not only with the gaining of new knowledge, skills and techniques for teaching but for most of them, a promotion and salary rise. Ultimately, the teachers who have completed the upgrade programme will have a positive effect on students and education in Samoa as a whole. Further success will be seen as the programme contributes to more effective and efficient teaching, which ultimately helps students to learn, grow and achieve their potential.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges faced by the teacher upgrade participants, school principals, and the Ministry of Education Assistant Chief Executive Officers, the upgrade programme has proved to be beneficial for teachers in Samoa. The implementation of such a programme, however, requires ongoing communication between all partners involved in the design and delivery. This study has identified areas of contestation between the upgrading teachers, school principals and the Ministry before, during and at the completion of the initial teacher upgrade programme. Some of the issues can be

explained by conflict theory which reminds us that the dominant education system shows bias towards middle-class social and cultural values, and thus creates extra challenges for students from developing nations who speak English as a second language. What this study has demonstrated is that, despite the challenges facing the participants, the issues can be navigated. *Va tapuia* (Amituanai-Toloo, 2006) is one way that upgrading teachers can negotiate the challenges that they face. Although the upgrading teachers struggled with the English language and academic demands of the programme, they can complete their Bachelor of Education studies with support from their school principals and the Ministry. The Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa also has a role to play in ensuring that their services appropriately cater for the upgrading teachers, and that ongoing communication with the Ministry and the school principals are maintained. It is important that all stakeholders work together, through *va tapuia*, to overcome these challenges in order to have an enduring effect on the improvement of educational standards for Samoan students.

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